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Date: March 2, 2009
To: Chairmen and Members of the Planning and Development Committee
From: Mary Glassman, First Selectman, Simsbury, Co-Chair CRCOG Legislative Committee
Subject: **Testimony on Bills to Promote Regionalization and Smart Growth in Connecticut**

The Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) is a regional planning organization representing the City of Hartford and the 28 surrounding communities. Our members have collaborated for more than 30 years on a wide range of projects to benefit our towns individually and the region as a whole. One of the many areas we dedicate ourselves to is helping members improve the efficiency of public services and to save tax dollars through regional shared services and other direct service initiatives. CRCOG also performs certain land use and transportation planning functions as required by State Statutes, and federal and state transportation agencies.

General Comments on Bills to Promote Regionalization

The local government fiscal crisis we find ourselves in looks like it will not go away any time soon. Without significant changes to the way local governments provide services, programs will be cut, professionalism and morale within local governments will deteriorate, and residents will pay higher property taxes. CRCOG is committed to facilitating regional service sharing, and supports continued funding of the existing Regional Performance Incentive Grant Program to get the most promising projects implemented. We also strongly assert that inter-municipal coordination by a Regional Planning Organization like CRCOG can facilitate decision-making and provide technical assistance that is **not just necessary, but vital** to the success of these projects. The regionalization incentive grant program created through **H.B. No. 6389, An Act Promoting Regionalization, removes RPOs from this vital facilitative role.** There are three simple actions that the legislature can take to promote appropriate regionalization of services:

1. Rather than establish a new program, **allocate the proposed \$50 million in funding associated with H.B. No. 6389 to the Regional Performance Incentive Grant Program that already exists.** Administrative structures for grant submission and reporting have already been put in place after considerable effort. CRCOG and its member communities would prefer to work through the Regional Performance Incentive Grant Program, rather than go through the alternate approaches proposed through House Bill No. 6389 and Committee Bill No. 384 that would require a great deal of start up effort.
2. **Reinstate the \$1,000,000 in State Grant In Aid funding** that was eliminated from the Governor's budget proposal. This funding is vital to support the shared services work that is ongoing and contemplated in the near future.

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3. Consider adoption of permissive legislation, such as **Committee Bill No. 371, An Act Concerning Inter-municipal Cooperation**, that would provide regional councils with the ability to undertake new programs that allow for regional tax base sharing, levying of regional sales and hotel taxes, and other initiatives. Several years ago, CRCOG was part of a coalition supporting a legislative proposal that would enable COGs and Councils of Elected Officials to operate as “regional assets districts”. CRCOG viewed this as a voluntary mechanism that could help us achieve several regional objectives: to support and finance regional assets with a stable funding source, to assure cost-effective development and/or operation of regional assets; to promote inter-town collaboration; to promote economic growth and vitality; and to strengthen urban centers as the economic and cultural hubs of their regions.

We also have the following comments on two specific bills:

- **Raised Bill 6585, An Act Concerning Regionalism, Section 6.** Section 6 reflects a very narrow role for regional organizations. It does not take into account the much wider range of activities that are routinely carried out by regional organizations in response to state statutes or municipal requests. SGIA funding as currently in place is essential to carrying out minimal planning under statutory provisions. Funding needs to be an ongoing commitment for ten year comprehensive plans, and statutorily-mandated review of zoning and subdivision proposals along town lines.

The emphasis with **Bill 6585** is multi-town services but does not address even broader regional efforts such as regional GIS, building permits or back office IT services – more broadly what we might call regional services. Many local officials believe that regional organization assistance is often essential to moving ahead on town or regional services and such efforts would suffer without regional assistance and coordination.

- **Governor’s Bill 6389, An Act Promoting Regionalization.** In general we support the concept of additional funding for regional initiatives, with the caveats noted in comment 1 above. However, in particular, Section 2 is a concern where it states: “Costs associated with Planning are not eligible...” There is a great deal of preparation work that goes into multi-town or regional service sharing – call it planning, preparation or project management – that is not easily funded elsewhere. SGIA is a critical general funding source, though the current funding level represents perhaps one tenth the funding level that many states allocate to support such functions. If this bill moves forward, CRCOG asks that Section 8 of this bill be amended to read:

“Sec. 8. (Effective July 1, 2009) The sum of one million five hundred thousand dollars is appropriated to the Office of Policy and Management, from the General Fund, for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2010, for grants to regional planning agencies to be distributed pursuant to Section 4-124q of the Connecticut General Statutes.”

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The Committee should be aware that CRCOG and other regional planning organizations are already encouraging, coordinating, and facilitating many regional shared services in our area of operation with the support of member dues contributions and State Grant in Aid (SGIA). These funds are critical, because they allow CRCOG to continue our work in cooperative purchasing, municipal services, and fulfilling legislative mandates concerning regional land use planning. Local dues and the SGIA are the most flexible funding sources available to regional councils, and they are the funds that allow us to undertake innovative projects on behalf of our member municipalities.

We are pleased that several of the bills being heard by this committee recognize the importance of regional cooperation in the provision of essential municipal services, and propose funding to support such efforts. However, based on our experience with the Regional Performance Incentive Grant Program and our long-standing Capitol Region Purchasing Council, even with the best of intentions by member towns, one entity is almost always needed to guide and support these efforts. As budgets and staffing tighten at the municipal level, Capitol Region towns are increasingly looking to CRCOG to be that coordinator and facilitator. The regionalization incentive grant program proposed through H.B. No. 6389 does not enable the State's existing regional coordination structure—the regional planning organizations—to play the important role in implementing new regional service sharing initiatives. In addition, the proposed elimination of the State Grant in Aid for Regional Planning further impedes our ability to develop new ideas and initiatives that can help local governments function more efficiently and cost-effectively.

Finally, for any of the bills intended to involve all regional planning organizations, the statutory references should include regional councils of governments, regional councils of elected officials, and regional planning agencies. Several bills being heard today only reference regional councils of elected officials.

General Comments on Bills Regarding Smart Growth

We applaud the Planning and Development Committee for considering a range of bills that support a more responsible approach to growth and conservation in Connecticut. We acknowledge that growth is necessary to the continued health and vitality of the region and the state. As our towns grow, it is important that the growth is carried out in a well-planned manner that preserves the best of what Connecticut and New England offer. Low-density development erodes the individual character of our urban, suburban and rural towns. Also, as we continue to spread out, it becomes increasingly hard to build a balanced transportation system and provide good access to jobs. Long and congested commutes make it difficult for employers to attract employees. When jobs, retail stores, and new housing are dispersed farther and farther out many people living in our City and older suburbs are denied access to them because they do not have cars to get there.

Well-planned development helps to preserve and strengthen our communities. It also saves tax dollars by making the most of available capacity in roads, sewers, water and other public services. At the same time, it helps protect key working farms, forests, and open space. We need state and local policies that support livable communities and encourage development in areas where infrastructure already exists. We can move in this direction by having better

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information, good tools and increased planning coordination to facilitate informed land use decisions that work in the long-term interest of Connecticut residents.

Within this broader context, CRCOG offers the following comments on several bills before the Committee today.

- **Raised Bill No. 6467, An Act Concerning Smart Growth and Plans of Conservation and Development.** The Section 1 definition of smart growth specifies a series of planning principles that are worthy of aspiring to, and are generally consistent with the guiding principles of the CRCOG Regional Plan of Conservation and Development. The goal of this bill is to achieve consistency among state, regional and municipal plans with regard to the smart growth principles. In concept, CRCOG supports working toward greater consistency, and using these plans as a basis for coordinating state investment decisions. However, it is not clear what the implications for towns and regions are if plans are determined to be inconsistent, and who would make that determination. These implications should be clarified.
- **Raised Bill No. 6464, An Act Concerning Coordinated Preservation and Development.** As stated above, CRCOG sees great value in using linked state, regional, and local plans as a basis for coordinating state investment decisions. This bill creates a new Face of Connecticut Steering Committee to review certain State funding actions for consistency with the smart growth definition proposed by Bill No. 6467. We question whether a new review committee is needed to accomplish the desired objective. Existing law enables these and similar funding decisions to be evaluated under the "priority funding areas" criteria that are due to be developed in the next State Plan of Conservation and Development in accordance with CGS Sec. 16a-27 as amended by PA 05-205, An Act Concerning Plans of Conservation and Development. We recommend that this approach be explored prior to establishing a new committee.
- **Raised Bill No. 6469, An Act Concerning Smart Growth and State Planning.** The Tax Incidence Study and Build Out Analysis proposed through this bill could be helpful in informing both state policy and municipal land use decisions. With regard to Sec. 3, numerous municipalities, state agencies and regional agencies, have already invested significant time and money in creating Geographic Information System (GIS) databases that are used for the purposes noted in this act. Furthermore, five of the fifteen regional planning organizations, including CRCOG, received funding last year from the Regional Performance Incentive Grant Program to upgrade or create web-based geographic information systems for use by their member communities. The Connecticut Geospatial Information Systems Council which represents these varied interests has been meeting for several years to improve the coordination and sharing of geospatial information being created by its various members. Rather than creating a new state-administered system, resources might be better spent improving and building upon the GIS systems and data sets already in place, and coordinating their further development and sharing. Unfortunately, Section 4 of this bill abolishes the Connecticut Geospatial Information Systems Council that has performed a valuable educational and coordinating role over the last few years.

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In an era when towns are going to need to cooperate, coordinate, and consider regional shared or consolidated services in order to deal with our fiscal crisis and grow in a more responsible manner, CRCOG is a vital mechanism for advocating for and supporting municipalities as a group. This is true for both municipal service and land use issues. It will be important to maintain RPOs as an important partner in the smart growth effort if we hope to achieve success. This is another area in which reinstatement of the SGIA is critical, as it supports our statutorily-mandated land use planning activities and many other shared service initiatives.

CRCOG thanks you for your consideration of these comments.